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ABSTRACT

This discussion asserts that the legitimate way to address the topic of value judgments in literature is to interpret the question as whether there are distinctively "literary" values and whether judgments can or should be made about literature on these grounds. Characteristic values appropriate to literature exist, just as moral values are apparent in the realm of behavior; judgments not only can, but should, be made about literature on the basis of these objective literary values. Although the definition of literature itself may be elusive, two general types may be differentiated: literature in the broad sense, including virtually any piece of writing (such as political tracts, scholarly treatises, philosophical works, and so on), and literature in the strict sense, restricted to expression that reveals the aspects of beauty appropriate to written material--language, style, form, and meaning--and maintains a certain independence from temporal concerns (such as novels, poetry, plays, essays, and some expository writing). Some implications for the classroom and for curriculum planning are noted. (KS)

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# "FIGHTING THE ZEITGEIST: REFLECTIONS OF A REACTIONARY"

George L. Stengren

The topic of this symposium suggests several different interpretations and approaches. As the philosopher in the group, I hope that I may be allowed to ask questions as well as to suggest some points of view.

First of all, how do we take the topic itself? "Value Judgments in Literature" could mean that we are looking at literature as a moral datum. For example, we might take the position that some literature is morally good, edifying, inspiring, or at least harmless, or on the other hand, degrading, disgusting, immoral, and naughty. I have been informed that this is not the way the topic is to be construed for our present purposes.

A different approach, though somewhat related, would be to raise questions about whether literature should or should not express value judgments of any sort. But, in a very real sense, to pose this question is to interpret our topic in yet a third way, that is, to take the position that we understand it to mean: value judgments about literature.

Still a fourth interpretation, again related to the previous one, is to consider whether there are distinctively literary values, and to suggest that judgments can or should be made about literature on these grounds.

Before we can deal with any of these possible approaches, I think it is necessary to get clear on our terminology. In our day, the expression "value judgment" is, of course, very popular, trendy, and chic. But I suspect that many people who use this expression do not have a very precise notion of what it means. We can use this expression quite confidently, it sounds important, even profound, but all too often it reflects a shallowness and indifference to what a value really is. The word "value" involves the notion of "the ought," what is right, good, noble, and positive, and its opposite "disvalue," conveys the notion of what is wrong, bad, evil, base, and negative--what ought not to be. We all frequently differentiate between what is the case and what ought to be the case although we may not have formulated clearly and precisely our standards for doing so.

Thus, when we speak of a value judgment, we are, if we are going to use language in an accurate way, speaking of a judgment which involves a decision between what ought to be or what ought not be, or any parallel pair of opposed terms such as I have suggested above. Now unless we choose to be totally irrational, in which case discussion is futile, we must have some standard or norm on which to base our judgments of value.

One of the most irritating things to hear is something like: "That's only a value judgment" or to hear someone say in an accusing or reproachful tone: "You're making a value judgment!" as if there were something wrong about making value judgments. There is a delightful paradox here--it involves making the value judgment that one ought not make value judgments. The fact is that we do make value judgments of all kinds very often, even though we may deny the possibility or legitimacy of doing so.

If we recognize that fact, then it would seem that our first step ought to be to sort all of this out so as to arrive at some reasonable and defensible positions.

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So, let us return to our initial set of questions. Are there distinctively literary values? Yes, I am convinced that there are. I am also convinced that we can discover some norms to judge with a fair degree of accuracy whether a certain sample of writing is, for example, good or bad as literature, a classic or potentially so, or on the other hand, shallow, trash, or simply not literature at all in any real sense. However, we run into trouble if we assume that these norms will be as explicit and precise as a mathematical formula. Let me try to illustrate what I mean by several examples of what I consider good literature and its opposite, so as to see whether some principles emerge.

To recapture your attention, which may be lagging at this point, let my first example be from the area of pornography, or if you prefer, erotic literature.

Elizabeth Ray's recent potboiler The Washington Fringe Benefit is simply junk. It is abundantly clear that there is no redeeming literary value in this dreary concatenation of sexual episodes. It clearly bears all the earmarks of something hastily thrown together by a semiliterate individual with a very deficient imagination, and no sense of style. Were it not for the scandal in which she was involved, most of us would never have heard of her non-book.

By contrast, John Updike's novel Couples has at least as many erotic elements, but there is much more to this book. There is a plot that is thoroughly developed, character development, narrative force, style, and a most effective us of language.

Well, you may say, Jacqueline Susann's novel Valley of the Dolls has all or most of these qualities to a degree, so is this good literature?

The qualification "to a degree" is essential here, I think. We may concede plot, plot development, narrative force, even style and a somewhat effective use of language. But the degree to which these are manifest in Valley of the Dolls is minimal even by generous standards, while Couples clearly exemplifies these in a very high degree. But even more important, and I shall have to summon up some courage to say it, there is in Couples a je ne sais quoi which absolutely distinguishes it from the other novel.

Another example may be drawn from the broad category of what we may call historical literature.

Leaving aside the aggressively dull and plodding sort of historical writing, let us compare Jim Bishop's The Longest Day with Winston Churchill's account of the same event. Allowing for all the appropriate differences such as Churchill's direct involvement at the highest level in the Allied war effort, still, from the standpoint of literary quality there are vast differences between the two accounts. Bishop's treatment of the invasion is breezy, rich in detail, and quite interesting. Yet Chruchill's magnificent command of the English language enables him to write an account that will no doubt become a classic. The difference is one between technical skill, craftsmanship, and art. Bishop's account is mostly journalism, Churchill's is literature.

This is not to say that there are no other great writers in English, and, of course, in other languages in the twentieth century. Whatever may be said for or against the Nobel Prize as a criterion, still, on balance, many of the Nobel Laureates in literature stand as clear examplars of literary excellence. It is no coincidence the Churchill was also awarded the Nobel Prize.

I could, of course, go on with other examples, from drama, for instance. The plays of Ibsen, Shakespeare, and perhaps Arthur Miller would be illustrative.

What clues do these examples give us as to criteria for literary value? Some of the hallmarks of literary values emerge rather clearly without being precise measuring instruments. In fiction we look for plot, a sense of structure, and character development, all of which must be both evident and yet subtle. In all writing which deserves the name of literature, including fiction, we look for effective, graceful, elegant use of language, for meaning beyond the simple recital of facts. We want literature to say something to us in a compelling way. Great literature seems to have a richness of meaning which is almost inexhaustible. Although we should be able to experience these and other qualities on first exposure we should not be able to extract the total value on first, second, or n+1 readings. Great literature typically has manifold significance and a timeless quality.

We see all of these qualities in various ways in the writings of many, if not most, of the authors who have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Again, let me say that I do not regard the Nobel Prize as the ultimate or only criterion. There are writers who have deserved this recognition by any decent standards who have not received it, and there have been some debatable awards. But by and large, the Nobel Laureates do provide us with a fairly consistent set of standards. When we extend our net to take in the works that have been traditionally and generally regarded as classics, we find the same general characteristics.

I have referred several times to the use of language as one of the criteria for good literature. Elegant language, effectively employed, is also usually simple. It does not necessarily involve what students sometimes call "big woids." It does not mean artificially fancy or flowery vocabulary or grandiose terminology. Didn't Horace warn us long ago to avoid purple patches? Again, if we look at the novels of Sigrid Undset or Knut Hamsun, or the plays of Ibsen or Shaw, we will be struck by the simple language, nickle words that are made to do the duty of gold pieces by being used with eminent effectiveness and impact. I don't think that any normally intelligent, decently educated person would ever have to resort to a dictionary or any other reference work while reading any of Churchill's writings, including his official documents and memoranda. Eliot is an exception, of course, as are also some of the works called classics. But in the case of the classics, the difficulty is often traceable to archaic translations and/or the changes in living languages. Again, Chaucer and Shakespeare pose problems for the reader who is unfamiliar with anything but the twentieth century idiom.

Hence, I think that it is quite clear that there are values proper to literature as such, and that these values can be discovered without a great deal of difficulty by those who are honestly disposed to do so. I think that it is also quite clear that these values have an objective, albeit non-scientific character in the sense that they are relatively independent of individual preferences and idiosyncracies. This brings me to another aspect of the Wertfreiheit nonsense I alluded to before. I simply cannot understand the attitude of someone who has adopted a career in any way related to literature, but especially the teaching thereof, who adopts the stance of strict and thoroughgoing value-neutrality. When someone makes a claim concerning literary quality or literary merit and the response is "Who's to say?" it is enough to try the patience of a plaster saint. It may just show how extensive and insidious is the influence of the liberal establishment,

for whom judgments of quality are anathema, determinations of excellence or inferiority are undemocratic and anti-social, and only the new, only what happens to capture the ineffable enthusiasm of a few outrageous people on Manhattan Island and their sycophants out in the boonies is worthy of praise. The latest is not necessarily the greatest. Far be it from me, however, to suggest that the "Who's to say?" reflex or the lust for novelty is a confession of incompetence. I would rather believe that it is only a reflection of the present age, a time of floundering. It is one thing to be tolerant of diversity, but it is quite another thing to adopt an academic or intellectual laissez-faire position to the extent that "anything goes." Should we not try to impose literary values on those who come to us to learn? Should we confirm and congratulate those who wallow in nescience, and worse, encourage them to instruct us in their (and our own) naivete? This, as Kierkegaard put it, is a subject fit for a comedy of the higher lunacy.

On the contrary, not only are there clear and objective norms for judging literary value and plentiful exemplars thereof, there are, or ought to be, experts who have demonstrated their competence to serve as judges in this area. How do they get to be experts? By going through the same painful and arduous process that has always produced competent people, that is, through years of study and exposure to the best that our civilization has produced and treasured-through the writings that have shaped our civilization and stood the test of time. Such people should be respected, and they should have the courage to insist on decent literary standards.

Teachers should also uphold these standards and even raise the general level of taste, if at all possible. There are obstacles, of course. There are people employed as teachers of literature on every level who are willing to treat all written or printed material as equally valuable and worthy to be considered literature. Perhaps this derives from a perverted notion of democracy or tolerance. Perhaps they simply don't <u>know</u> what is good and what is inferior literature. Perhaps they have given up fighting the Zeitgeist. There may be some who have never learned to enjoy great literature and so are unable to communicate an enthusiasm for it.

Whatever may be the case, I think that there is a great need to reaffirm a commitment to <u>great</u> literature as distinct from the mediocre and the tawdry. No doubt students will continue to read the junk anyway, but this is no reason for teachers to incorporate inferior material into the curriculum as a concession to popularity. College and University teachers of literature have a special obligation in this respect. After all, they are the ones who train teachers for the elementary and secondary schools, and if the latter are not thoroughly imbued with a love of great literature, it is not long before students turn up on college campuses with a serious lack of awareness of the cultural heritage of our civilization and a consequent inability to understand the contemporary scene. This, alas, becomes a self-perpetuating situation as these students go out to become teachers and share their ignorance with the innocent.

However, before I digress too far, let me try to connect these parenthetical remarks to my main thesis.

I have maintained that a legitimate way to interpret the topic of this symposium is to say that we are looking into the question of whether there are distinctively literary values and whether judgments can or should be made about literature on these grounds.

No doubt it is quite clear that I answer all of these in the affirmative. There are are characteristic values appropriate to literature just as there are moral values in the realm of behavior, and the existence of values in either order in no way depends on whether they are observed or not. Likewise, I have insisted that judgments not only can but should be made about literature on the basis of objective literary values.

However, I suspect that this view is by no means universally held by professionals, and I have tried to suggest some reasons for this dreadful situation.

A parallel to much of this is in the not unrelated area of the writing we expect and accept from our students. I hardly need tell you that illiteracy has broken out and reached epidemic proportions. Spelling, grammar, coherence seem to be beyond the ken of many people today. When I call a student's attention to egregious errors of this sort I often get the response: "Well you know what I mean," or, "I had the right idea, so how I say it doesn't matter" or the classic "This isn't an English class, you know!" Although I assure them that I am well aware of that, I sometimes wonder what they say to the English teacher. Let me emphasize that I do not blame English departments for this situation. They cannot do it alone. If anything, I blame the rest of us who do not insist on an appropriate level of performance, so as to reinforce the efforts of English departments.

If street language, ethnic dialects, and illiterate composition are accepted and even defended as the equal of standard English, we will soon see the total demise of communication. And so instead of democratizing education we will see precisely the opposite effect, there will be, as the German word puts it so piquantly, a "Verschlimmbesserung." What will happen in the name of democracy is that a small elite group will learn how to manipulate symbols, language, and thought, so that they will inevitably gain control of society.

On the other hand, if we really want to democratize education, we will not deprive anyone of the treasures of western civilization. All who pass through our schools ought to have some exposure to great literature presented in such a way that it will have a chance of being accepted. We may have to face up to the need for some system of tracking despite the manifold problems in this area.

But in any case, if we really are convinced that there are distinctively literary values and that these provide a basis for making judgments about literature, we ought to act resolutely on this conviction.

For example, I think that some tightening up of curricula is in order in some instances. It is, I suspect, theoretically possible for a student to major in English and even get graduate degrees in English without ever having to read a word of Chaucer or Shakespeare or other major literary figures.

There are, then, real and authentic values of all sorts. There are moral values, social values, political values, and esthetic values, which last class includes literary values. We have to develop a clear notion of each of these kinds of values, their scope and application. We have to avoid blurring the distinctions within each class and between the classes themselves.

So to return for the last time to my original attempt to classify the various ways we may understand the topic of this symposium, I don't think that I have to reiterate my position regarding what I think about the fourth interpretation, namely,

the question of whether there are distinctively literary values and whether judgments can or should be made on these grounds.

You will perhaps recall that I suggested a third interpretation which is related to the fourth as well as the second, namely, that we are concerned with value judgments about literature. This is distinct from the fourth interpretation in that here we may focus on making a judgment, in terms of some appropriate value or criterion, about whether a certain piece of writing is or is not literature at all. Under this heading, naturally, we would be concerned with the nature of literature primarily and the quality of literature secondarily. Here it may be useful to distinguish between literature in the broad sense of the word and literature in the strict sense. Examples of literature in the broad sense would include virtually any piece of writing such as political tracts, scholarly treatises, most philosophical works, dissertations, technical manuals, even advertising material, and , of course, literature in the strict sense. Literature in the strict sense would be restricted to belles lettres; novels, plays, poetry, essays, some expository writing. The main differentiating criteria for literature proper have already been suggested: the aspects of beauty appropriate to written material; language, style, form, meaning for human beings as such, and a certain independence of strictly temporal relevance. Literature in the strict sense is essentially oriented toward such values, whereas literature in the broad sense in not necessarily so, but has different purposes. Purely literary values need not be absent from literature in general, and it is often better that they be present, but they are not essential. So, for example, The Dialogues of Plato are universally recognized both as great philosophical documents (literature in the general sense) and as great literature (in the strict sense). We can hardly say this about the works of Aristotle of Hegel, however. These are undeniably great as philosophical treatises, but it would be ludicrous to claim that they are literary masterpieces.

Hence, it would seem that to distinguish between literature in the strict sense and literature in the broad sense, that is, to make a value judgment about literature, we would have to examine the purpose of a piece of writing. If the purpose is essentially other than an esthetic one then usually we should have to classify such a work as literature in the broad sense. Thus, if a certain work is primarily designed to inform, motivate, direct, or guide the reader, or simply to report some discoveries, to analyze or synthesize knowledge, as long as minimal standards are met, then this sort of thing would be literature in the broad sense. Polemical writing, articles in medical journals and even sometimes sociological tracts might fall into this class.

As belonging within the general class of literature in the broad sense, literature proper may indeed do any or all of the things done by literature in general. It may inform, edify, incite to action, and so on. But its inherent quality, its structure and development, its ultimate result is essentially different. If a certain piece of writing is designed to be literature in the strict sense, it must be judged first on the basis of whether or not it belongs in this or the larger category. Assuming the former, it must then be judged in terms of properly literary values. But as I have already indicated, a work which may have been consciously intended to be literature in the broad sense may by a happy accident be properly classified as literature in the strict sense through having met the relevant standards in an eminent degree. Again, let me mention the historical writings of Winston Churchill as an example..

Oratory at its best is another instance of this. Persuasive speech generally falls between the two classes, but there are certainly many examples of speeches designed for specific occasions which have entered the class of literature in the strict sense. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is a fine example, even though he was mistaken when he said that "the world will little note nor long remember what we may here, but it can never forget they, whoever they were, are remembered, is Lincoln's magnificent speech itself. Had a less effective orator, lacking Lincoln's obvious sense of style and command of language made a speech on the same occasion to commemorate the same events, both the events and the occasion would have been forgotten within a week. Oliver Jensen's magnificent parody of the Gettysburg Address translated into Eisenhowerese illustrates this perfectly. Another example of oratory as literature in the strict sense is almost anything said in public by the Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, who has been described as someone who "speaks in final drafts." I think that he could read stock market quotations in such a way that we would consider it belles lettres.

Hence, while it seems generally correct to confine the use of the term literature in the strict sense to written material, it is true that the essential character of literature is the effective use of language, so that, in a way, spoken language can be called literature. But unless language is written down or recorded in some permanent way, it obviously cannot enter into the available resources of our cultural heritage. Speeches which do not qualify as literature in the strict sense may be preserved in archives and the back files of the New York Times, but again, it is only those which meet the qualifications I have mentioned that will enter the domain of literature proper.

Still another kind of value judgment that may be made about literature concerns whether it is worth the bother at all. Here we are dealing with literature in the strict sense. Informative literature, literature in the broad sense, derives whatever value it has from something extraneous to the literature itself. What is it good for? Does it accomplish the intended result? Does it give us information, edification, or whatever in such a way that we can turn it to account? If so, then it is good inasmuch as it is useful. But a different sort of value judgment is appropriate for literature in the strict sense. Here we need instead of a judgment of utility in a crass and obvious way, a judgment of worth in a different order. We have all perhaps heard the definition of a vulgar man as someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Literature in the strict sense should not be judged by whether it helps us to assemble a bicycle, be a better stockbroker, cope with the children, or make money. Any or all of these may be indirectly the result of great literature, but they are not inherent goals of literature proper. Literature in the strict sense is judged by its value in enriching our lives as humans, lifting us out of the routine, evoking our noblest responses. For those who are prepared for it and capable of digesting it, it provides the purest and greatest of pleasures. Literature is properly classified among the humanities precisely because it is so closely identified with what concerns us as humans first and foremost, rather than as humans who are physicians, bus drivers, generals, or politicians. In other words, we may interpret our topic as an inquiry into whether literature proper has an intrinsic value that is unique to it. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that I would answer that question affirmatively. With all the emphasis on vocational, technical, and professional training these days there is a great need to stress this point. It may seem that the vulgarians are taking over, and if they do, we may well enter the first real dark age in human history. Humanists must make more effective efforts to "sell" the value of their produce on its own merits.

The second way of interpreting our topic is as an inquiry into whether literature as such should or should not express value judgments of any sort. I think that it should be evident from what I have said that literature proper may or may not express or evoke judgments about all sorts of values, moral, esthetic, religious, etc. But these, if they occur, should flow naturally from the work of art itself as an incidental rather than essential ingredient. In other words, literature in the strict sense need not express any value judgments at all, but only contain values proper to its nature about which judgments can be made. Thus to ask whether literature should or should not express value judgments is to pose a false dichotomy.

Finally, the question about whether literature should be evaluated from a moral standpoint can be considered briefly. Again, I think that the answer to this should be clear from what I have said. To judge a piece of literature on the basis of whether its content is morally acceptable or edifying rather than by properly literary values is to apply alien standards. This is to confuse the nature and purpose of literature in the strict sense with a kind of literature in general. Spiritual reading, edifying discourses, moral exhortations have, no doubt, a legitimate function, and some of them may also qualify as literature in the strict sense. But this does not mean that all literature must be judged by whether it motivates us to better behavior. Much of it does, even if it is not explicitly designed to do so, even better than tracts intended for this purpose, but again, literature as such must be judged according to properly literary standards not by incidental considerations.

So how is all of this opposed to the spirit of the age? Am I really a reactionary? I hope that I am mistaken, but it seems to me that during the past twenty years or so in America there has been a cancerous trend in academic circles to abandon the treasures of our civilization for the new, the untried, the fashionable, just for the sake of novelty, to be "with it." We gather up trash and exhibit it as art, we listen to cacophony and call it music, we praise incoherent monosyllabic grunts as great literature, all in the mindless pursuit of fetters disguised as liberation. We must not trouble students to reach acceptable levels of competence and culture, or anything else. We must not shake up their minds or disturb their shabby certitudes. What can the classics possibly say to us sophisticated technocrats? Actually, it is not that the classics or serious humanistic studies have been tried and found wanting; they have been found difficult and not tried.

So, I suppose I am a reactionary quixotically tilting at the Zeitgeist, lamenting the moribund condition of the humanities in general and the cultivation of great literature in particular. If, in advocating a return to the classics, I am a reactionary, then I am proud to be one. On strictly pragmatic grounds we can demonstrate the value of humane letters. These are treasures more lasting than bronze, more precious than gold, treasures that can be completely possessed by each yet equally and fully shared by all.

Hence, let us maintain that there is such a thing as good literature, judged by appropriate literary standards, that there is an abundant supply of it, and that we ought to become culture pushers. Let us not succumb to the Zeitgeist. Let us not yield to pressures to treat inferior material as the equal or the equivalent of the truly valuable out of some distorted notion of tolerance or relevance.

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